Society and the City: accommodating diversity

The Inclusive City: sustainability, urban design and the cultures of ageing

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“Cities can be disabling and threatening environments at any age. The difference is that at seventy-five or eighty-five, people may feel an even greater sense of being trapped or disadvantaged by urban decay. Rogers describes cities as acting like ‘demographic magnets’ through the way in which they facilitate work or foster cultural development. But we need to challenge the view that once individuals have finished with work they should be seen, or treated, as marginal to the city……What should be possible, is that people view staying in cities into old age as a positive choice, and not one thrust upon them because they happen to lack alternatives.”

Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips and Ogg (2001)
The Family and Community Life of Older People
Route Map for the Presentation

• Demographic change and ageing societies
• Ageing cities and their legacy of ‘architectural disability’
• ‘Transgenerational design’, a recipe for urban sustainability
• Enhancing physical, sensory and cognitive impairment through research and design
• ‘Cultures of ageing’ and why more older people are likely to want to live in cities in the future
• Including older users in the urban design agenda, and why this will be good for urban sustainability
Ageing Societies

- The construction of later life as a separate, distinctive life stage (retirement, pensioner) is a relatively recent phenomenon of the developed world.

- In the UK, average life expectancy at birth in 1901 was just 45.5 years for a man and 49 years for a woman. The comparable figures today are 75.4 years for a man and 80.2 years for a woman.

- In 1901, people over retirement age made up just 6% of the total population. This had risen to 14% in 1951, and 18% by 2001.
The Challenge of Longevity

• In most parts of the developed world, birth rates are falling and people are living longer. In the UK, by 2025 a third of the population will be over 60. Most people will be ‘older’ for a third of their lifespan. Significant numbers will live to be a hundred.

• Last century there were 10 people of working age for each older person, by 1991 the ratio was 3:1 and by the middle of this century it will be 1.5:1. (Worcester, 2000).

• Ageing is therefore the single most important global phenomenon occurring to humanity, and it is one for which we need actively to plan.
Grey Purse, Grey Power

• Planning for the future includes acknowledging the fact that, throughout the EU, living standards are rising for people of all ages. We can therefore predict that older people’s aspirations will change.

• From the current modest expectation of living independently and avoiding being ‘burdensome’, to a more radical view that, whatever the future holds, we are entitled to remain in control of our lives and to continue to enjoy our chosen lifestyle.

• The majority of tomorrow’s older people will enjoy and exercise greater purchasing power than today’s elders and will create a significant consumer marketplace that cities need to address.

![Bar chart showing increase in numbers of people over 60 in the EU from 2000 to 2020.]

80 million                        100 million

Numbers of people over 60 in the EU
The Urbanising World

• We also need to consider that we live in an urbanising world. For the first time in the history of the planet, urbanisation has become the fundamental human condition. Half of all humanity now lives in cities.

• Urban populations are growing three times faster than overall populations. Soon, three quarters of the world’s people will be city dwellers. (Girardet, 1996)

• As the twin changes of urbanisation and longevity kick in, it is inevitable that more older people will live in cities. This will pose new problems for urban design that were not even raised by previous social generations.

Europe at light showing light pollution from London and Nicosia
Growing Older in the Inner City

• Irrespective of how they have been designed, cities can be diverse, vibrant and exciting places, especially for the young.

• They are engines of economic development, employment, and opportunity and centres of learning, culture and leisure.

• But many of the world’s cities are polluted, congested, overcrowded and crime-ridden. Their physical infrastructure is decaying and they are almost invariably associated with concentrations of poor housing and high levels of poverty and social disadvantage.

Cities can therefore be an intimidating experience, especially for older people.
Ageing Cities

• The most significant feature of the urban environment is its sheer permanence. Cities grow by accretion and rarely experience a complete overhaul.

• For most of history, the urban realm was designed for fit adults and any without thought to later life. This has left a legacy of environmental barriers that tend to exclude older people or prevent older people living in cities from ageing actively, so that more and more of our towns and cities are becoming a trap or a place of last resort for older people.

• Environmental factors that are known to discourage and disadvantage older people include:
  – Poor, unreliable public transport, and street space that is dominated by the car
  – Inaccessible and confusing public buildings and retail
  – Unattractive, unsafe urban neighbourhoods and a shortage of safe, affordable housing
  – Increasingly, an antisocial 24 / 7 culture that is dominated by crowds of young people.

• Taken together these problems exert environmental pressure on older people that can lead to ‘architectural disability’.
Architectural Disability

“Architectural disability occurs when the physical design, layout and construction of buildings and places confronts people with hazards and barriers that make the built environment inconvenient, uncomfortable or unsafe for everyone to use and may even prevent some people from using it at all.”

• Poor design can be every bit as ‘disabling’ as any medical disability. These are problems that affect us all: 90% of people may suffer from ‘architectural disability’ at some time in their lives….

• But, because of the way humans age, we are particularly susceptible to it as we grow older. Currently, many urban environments disable their older users. Some actually exclude older people because they are so disabling. Set in the context of the ageing society, this situation is unsustainable.
The Physiology of Ageing

- Of course, the majority of adults are capable of normal functioning throughout their life. However, later life does usher in age related changes - physical, sensory and cognitive - that impose limitations on the human body that are well researched and understood.

- At 40, we may lose 20 mph off our tennis serve and 50 m. off our golf drive, but we will still play.

- After about 55, we begin to lose colour sensitivity, known as ‘red shift’, so that it is more difficult to apply make up or co-ordinate clothing, but we still expect to look smart.

- By 85, about 65% of elders will experience some degree of confusion or dementia, but we may still expect to go out and about.

- It is normal to age. Ageing is not a ‘handicap’ and is not like having a ‘disability’. We may fear disability but we all hope to grow old. Nor is ageing a ‘problem’. Longevity is an achievement that offers tomorrow’s societies unparalleled opportunities.

- What is more, older people so diverse that it is impossible to conceptualise ‘older people’ as a separate user group. Older people should not be thought of as any different from you or I. They are, in fact, ‘our future selves’.
Transgenerational Design

“a design philosophy through which the normal, age-related, dynamic changes that are common to all older people are internalised into the design brief, so as to influence the design of buildings and products for all adults in ways that make them better suited to older people’s needs, values and aspirations.”

• To counter the adverse effects of inappropriately designed urban environments, age-related changes need to be acknowledged and accommodated by planners and designers, because all human beings change with age.

• Often, the payoff for effective environmental intervention is very high. Architectural disability is eminently treatable by ‘environmental therapy’ which can result in improved functional competence and enhanced quality of life.

• I shall now show you three demonstration projects that suggest how transgenerational design can reverse the ageing process by ‘debarriering’ the urban realm to make it more sustainable for older people with physical, sensory or cognitive deficits.
Design for Physical Sustainability

- Older people are particularly vulnerable to defects in the design of the urban environment that affect physical mobility. Yet research has also shown that mobility is the key to reducing social isolation.

- Poor design features that deter older pedestrians from getting out and about in the inner city include:
  - difficult access and changes of level
  - poorly maintained pavements
  - busy roads with few crossing points
  - isolated, unlit bus stops
  - lack of adequate seating
  - no public toilets and
  - high, steep steps.

- Nearly half of all pedestrians killed on the roads in the UK are over 60.
The Hackney Plusbus
Dr. Nick Tyler, University College London

- Flat floor fully accessible bus.
- The bus has 11 seats and space for 3 wheelchairs.
- It has automatic doors at the front side door and a ramp at the back side door.
- It runs every 30 minutes on a fixed figure of eight route past all the places older people want to go to.
- Older people manage the scheme themselves.
- Revolutionised people’s lives.
- Now also operating in rural Cumbria.
Research has also been carried out to establish what visually impaired people perceive as their major problems when using the built environment.

By asking them to identify the colour and luminance contrast combinations they felt hindered or assisted in search and navigation tasks in buildings and places.

In order to specify colour contrast thresholds and suitable colour combinations that could be used in the ‘real world’, to assist people with low vision to use public buildings and urban places easily and safely.
Finally, if we want to encourage older people to live in their own neighbourhoods for as long as possible, it is important to establish how the outdoor environment can be designed to support older people, particularly those with dementia.

This means identifying those design factors which influence the ability of older people with dementia to successfully negotiate the external environment.

In order to offer guidance to designers at all scales from the design of urban realm to design of street furniture.
Familiar Features

• This project involved comparing the results of conversational interviews, accompanied walks and responses to photographs by older people with dementia with those from an older control group whose cognition was normal.

• Coupled to objective measures of the external environment

• Responses to some photographs of environmental features were dissimilar and predictable
  – people with dementia preferred the familiar, traditional, telephone box
  – while control group members preferred the easier to use, modern telephone box
Informality and Modernity

- However, the research also highlighted some findings that were far less obvious

- Responses to hard landscaped open space photographs were dissimilar
  - people with dementia preferred the vibrant, informal, modern open space with plenty of activity and environmental features
  - while control group members preferred the quiet, formal open space with historic architecture
Designing the urban realm for older people with dementia

- Short, gently winding streets with wide pavements and good visual access
- Varied urban form and architectural features
- Clearly defined, pedestrianised streets and open spaces
- Simple, explicit signs situated at decision points, positioned to enable good visual access and with unambiguous graphics in clear colours of distinctive contrast to background
- Smooth, plain, non-slip, non-reflective paving
- Familiar, easy to use street furniture
- All of the above are design features that should improve the quality of life of all older people
Emerging Cultures of Ageing

• These projects show that it is possible to intervene in the inner city to make urban living more attractive and sustainable for older people, but why should we bother?

• Sociologists agree that our familiar idea of the ‘seven ages of humanity’ is about to disappear. Throughout Europe and indeed the developed world, people of all ages are increasingly likely to define themselves by their chosen lifestyle and not by externally ascribed attributes such as ‘old age pensioner’. Many of the conventions and stereotypes that currently govern people’s behaviour in later life will therefore disappear, (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000).

• So I shall conclude by giving six reasons why more older people may want to live in cities in future, making it imperative that we take a transgenerational approach to urban design now.

‘Born again’ bikers in their 60s
Third Agers

- Until recently, it was commonplace in Europe for older people to migrate towards the urban core and the tendency to move out of the city on retirement is a relatively new phenomenon.

- Emerging lifestyles may embrace a more positive attitude towards urban living. ‘Third ages’ who grew up post WWII see later life as a unique time of independence from work, family ties and an opportunity to enjoy leisure.

- Cities provide unparalleled opportunities for going out and about, education, entertainment and self-fulfilment. Living in a city centre places the main ‘theatres of life’ on the doorstep, convenient for the older consumer.
Age Resistors

- More and more older people are choosing to ‘stay young’ rather than to ‘grow old’. This requires an intense body-consciousness.

- Everyone can benefit from exercise, but anti-ageing asserts that the deficits that result from physiological ageing can be delayed by keeping fit, working-out, fashion and cosmetics, food supplements and body reshaping through surgery.

- Cities are dominated by youth culture and everything new. They have the concentrations of the health clubs, trainers and therapists that are necessary to support these goals.

Role model Jane Fonda is in now in her 60s
Older Workers

- Mandatory retirement at 60 / 65 is a recent ‘invention’ that implies withdrawal from the productive world of work, but most people in mid-life today can look forward to about 30 years of active life post-retirement.

- More people are making a mid-life change from ‘a job for life’ not into early retirement, but into a ‘second career’, often as an entrepreneur. Europe needs this growing pool of skills, talents and experiences and in future more people will continue to work as attitudes to retirement become flexible.

- Older people who work but who do not want to commute will choose to live close to the main job markets in cities.
Lifelong Learners

• If people are to remain economically active for longer, they will need to keep updating their skills and expertise throughout their life.

• More older adult learners will return to further and higher education, and not just to add to their skills bank but also for the sheer pleasure of learning.

• Older students are not ‘escaping from the nest’ and so most will want to live close to their place of study, which, given the location of most universities, is likely to be in cities.
Leisure Consumers

• Many more people will benefit from an occupational or personal pension in future. Already, post-retirement incomes are increasing faster than average earnings and so a greater proportion of older people will have more money to spend on leisure.

• Some will choose to spend their disposable income on the cultural and leisure activities that are concentrated in cities.

• Though cities are also likely to contain concentrations of older people who are very poor.
Volunteers and Citizens

• Older people will be needed in many walks of life, to fill the gaps that are left in the social fabric as the number of working age adults declines throughout Europe in our towns and cities, as demography predicts will happen.

• Older people have the maturity, life skills, time and citizenship that are needed for the ‘caring professions’ and by charities and by voluntary and community based organisations.

• Social disadvantage is greatest in cities, so it is imperative that more older volunteers choose an urban lifestyle in future.
Inclusive Cities for the Ageing Society

- Retaining older populations and attracting more older people to cities will require us to provide:
  - Affordable housing
  - Integrated transport
  - Improved public services
  - Urban regeneration
  - Resource centres.

- People will need to feel that the urban environment is well-designed, attractive, friendly and above all, safe.
Urban Design Comes of Age

• However, this will require a radical rethink by the design professionals - architects, planners and urban designers - who currently ‘own’ the knowledge about urban sustainability.

• Older people must also be included in the design process to ensure:
  – Choice and equality of opportunity
  – Flexibility and adaptability
  – Giving people a voice
  – Eliminating architectural disability.

• The payoff is that if the city becomes a more sustainable environment for older people it will be more sustainable for everyone, and if we implement changes now, we will surely be among the beneficiaries.
The End!
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